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ABSTRACT

One of the University of Minnesota's two writing tutorial programs, Composition 1013, constitutes the second quarter of freshman composition and is designed as an option for students with specialized writing needs, such as students of English as a Second Language (ESL). The course is perceived by students as remedial, and instructors do not feel the approach is successful. Student and teacher roles are ill-defined, students do not have adequate writing models, and the one-to-one structure can create over-dependence on the instructor. Changes were undertaken to make the course more dynamic, to give students confidence, and to take pressure off students and instructors. The resulting alternative course design includes weekly conference group meetings made up of three students and weekly individual student-instructor sessions. A class for ESL students only was piloted first. Unit topics included ideal careers, career-related communication needs, and narratives based on students' home cultures. The course improved student confidence, productivity, and skills. However, class homogeneity made peer modeling difficult. A similar class for native speakers focused on writing about movies, including expression of personal reactions to films, critical reading and analysis, and research and analysis. The new format has been found generally successful, and the course is being re-offered with some modifications. (MSE)

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Conference Groups in the Writing Center: Shared Resources

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University of Minnesota
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I

Tutors, ESL students and Composition 1013: An Overview

Rich Carr

The University of Minnesota Writing Laboratory serves as a general support service to the Composition Program. All students are required to take two writing courses: freshman composition (Comp 1011) and an upper division course related to their major field. The Writing Lab helps those students whose writing needs are not met in their composition course by giving them an extra hour of weekly instruction in a tutorial format. In addition, we teach two tutorial courses in the Lab : Composition 1013 — Writing Practice II — and Composition 3085 — Conference Course in Advanced Composition. The former course provides the focus for this paper.

Composition 1013 is the second quarter of freshman writing practice. Once a required course, it is now an option for those students with specialized writing needs. It is particularly designed for those who will encounter marked difficulty in dealing successfully with writing assignments in future courses. They may have trouble generating, developing, and organizing ideas; building arguments logically; using language effectively (i.e. so as to make themselves understood) The Comp 1011 instructor decides whether a

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student should enroll in 1013, and those referred to the course must register in one of the two subsequent quarters. Comp 1013 is hardly the norm for University students—during the 1989-90 school year the Lab handled 45 1013 students—yet for these struggling writers the course is often essential to their academic success.

Comp 1013 is not billed as a remedial course, yet the course has a remedial component and—unfortunately—a remedial feel. The 1013 student has been separated from the group and set up in an individualized course designed to address his or specific writing needs. Tutor and student meet for one hour each week to discuss, work on, and revise writing assignments.

For many students this one-on-one dynamic does offer a remedy. Students are given attention they would miss in a larger class, as the instructor focuses on writing matters that concern each student particularly. ESL students comprise the larger part of Writing Lab clientele and a large share of the 1013 population as well. If the ESL students have come from a regular freshman composition section (the University offers several ESL-only sections per quarter; the native speaker courses are the "regular" ones), they probably sought to avoid attracting instructor attention, hoping to blend into the group as much as possible. If the ESL 1013 students were enrolled in an ESL freshman comp course, they most likely were in the bottom percentile of that second language group and were also less likely to participate actively or work on improving their skills in class. These second language writers can thus especially derive benefits from the concentrated dynamic of the weekly tutorial.

Yet few 1013 instructors have been happy with the course; few believe that they have given their students a full 4-credit writing course. One of the salient problems for 1013 instructors is the frequently defeatist attitude of the students. Those who have been singled out as poor writers often continue to think of themselves as poor writers struggling and

suffering alone. Typical 1013 students might also have some trouble functioning as learners. They are often less adept at following directions, working with others, and participating generally than are their peers in the University at large. The one-on-one set-up does not help them become better students.

The concentrated attention of the course does not always work in the student's favor either; at times there is too much focus on one thing and one person. The teacher directs instruction to the particular reasons for the student's presence in 1013 and has tailored assignments to get at the student's writing difficulties. But the student receives response from one reader only and that reader's response is held up naturally as an authoritative one. This arrangement with the instructor as sole respondent and authority defeats the cooperative approach of the University of Minnesota Composition Program.

And Comp 1013 has just not felt equal to 4-credit writing course. The intensity of the contact is supposed to compensate for the reduction in overall class time. 1013 students meet with their instructor 50 minutes per week while they would spend 150 minutes per week in a composition course. However, few would argue that this intensive 50 minutes is always time well spent; instructors complain of a lack of dynamism in the constant teacher-student interchange.

For ESL students the tutorial set-up brings disadvantages for several specific reasons. Certainly, one of the benefits of a tutorial is the friendly atmosphere that generally develops. The instructor has the role of confidence-builder, and for the defeatist writer that confidence-building is a plus. Even so, ESL students need more than a friendly, encouraging instructor; they need real skills in grammar, organization, development of ideas. The tutorial dynamic does not always allow for an easy switch from writing cheerleader to grammar teacher, and the cheerleading role may supersede the other to the detriment of the second language writers.

In the tutorial set-up the student receives no writing models for comparison; the only model is that provided by the teacher—the expert native speaker—and it is often not helpful. ESL students benefit from seeing the prose of their peers and gaining a more real sense of the assignment and a more realistic sense of the result.

The student role itself is not clearly defined in the 1013 structure. ESL students are used to dealing with teachers who allow for their not understanding or not being prepared for class, but like their American 1013 peers, they need to learn to be university students. Other students can often provide the pressure for keeping deadlines, coming prepared to discuss an article, or participating actively in discussion that a teacher cannot. In fact, 1013 usually has too much teacher talk. The teacher gives the answer, and the student does not move toward accepting a cooperative learning experience and does not learn to accept the responsibility of contributing.

Finally, the one-on-one relationship can create in the students an overdependence on the instructor. The ESL student can tie her or his writing success to the tutorial experience and may leave the course believing that he or she cannot succeed without a tutor's help, especially this tutor's help.

These descriptions may overstress the negative, but last year Robin Murie, the ESL Liaison to the Composition Program, and I, the Writing Lab Coordinator, decided that the negatives were strong enough to warrant alteration in the structure of Comp 1013. We centered our discussions for proposed changes around the following three questions:

- How can we create a more dynamic course that allows students to take a greater role and responsibility in learning and writing?
- How can we develop a course that gives the necessary focus on the individual but does not seem a wholly remedial experience?
- How might we send these writers out into the University of Minnesota and

elsewhere as more confident, adept writers after an enjoyable course experience?

Out of our questioning and discussing we developed the Comp 1013 Conference Course.

The University of Minnesota Composition Program is cooperative; composition courses are built around the concept of conferencing. Students in most writing courses are placed in conference groups of four or five to review rough drafts and to advise fellow group members on constructing their final draft. The success of conferencing is most pronounced at the lower levels; freshmen overwhelmingly rate the conference experience as the best part of Comp 1011.

We wanted a course that took the pressure off one teacher and one student and at the same time forced both sides to prepare better as teacher and student. Too often the one-to-one rapport guides the discussion and not always to great effect. A conference group component would allow for real discussion of student writing and outside readings. 1013 would have more of the shape of a course, something to be taken seriously.

We still recognized the need for individual instruction. The student has been referred because a skill or skills does not meet academic standards, and the goal of 1013 is to enable the student to overcome writing deficiencies or problems. Therefore, a tutorial component would remain an essential; students—both second language and native speaker—need expert guidance.

We were also restricted by practical concerns of space and staff. Each quarter six or seven graduate teaching assistants tutor twelve hours per week each, and the ESL Program provides and additional 12-18 hours of tutorial support. However, teaching 1013 is only one segment of a tutor's duties; Comp 3085 students, course referrals, and drop-ins must also be handled. Furthermore, the Writing Lab is a small room with five tables; only so

many chairs will fit around them.

Robin and I proposed a pilot 1013 Conference Course for Winter Quarter 1990. Our original plan involved a weekly 50-minute conference group meeting of three students and a weekly individual student-instructor session for twenty-five minutes. The conference group session would provide the benefits already mentioned, and the individual session would center around a student's special needs. The tutorial 1013 would remain for students with tight schedules, those who request it, and those with highly specialized needs. Pat Price piloted the first 1013 Conference Course in Winter Quarter 1990—an ESL group— and Stephanie Athey directed a native speaker 1013 group in Spring Quarter.

II

ESL Composition 1013: Group Pilot

Pat Price

Initially when I was asked to coordinate a group-based lab class, Composition 1013, the pilot project was not tailored to an ESL audience. Instead I devised a preliminary syllabus with flexible assignments to be modified in the second week of the quarter after I had met with my group and could assess their particular interests, needs, and problems. Since the course was designed to address the special requirements of students who had been unsuccessful in the larger freshman composition class, I planned a course emphasizing writing as a practical skill and adopting a "problem solving" approach to writing difficulties. Including a group component in a traditionally tutorial course helps to dispel the "singled out" feeling many 1013 students experience on being referred to a second quarter of freshman writing when most of their counterparts have finished their lower-division writing requirement.

The first two units of the generic syllabus hinge on two aspects of each student's "Dream Job." In the first section, students write about the kind of career they hope to

prepare for in college. They also write a short paperexploring how their major prepares them for this work. Next students are required to interview a professional in their chosen field to find out what kinds of writing are required and what level of writing skill they will need to develop in order to succeed in their dream job. (Typically, students are surprised to discover the volume and variety of writing required.) Finally, they gather written materials generated on the job and use them to determine a general picture of writing needs in their chosen profession. Group meetings focus on critiquing rough drafts and generating and sharing ideas.

In the second job-related unit, students examine types of writing necessary to get a job: resumes, cover letters, requests for information, acknowledgments, writing samples, other reports. Then each prepares a job dossier. Next students look critically at writing generated on the job to see what skills they will need to develop to be successful in the workplace noting audience, level of expertise, organizing principles, and vocabulary. Analyzing these kinds of writings is liberating for many students, helping them to determine what will be expected in their own field of expertise.

After so much vocational focus, the quarter ends with more informal writing. Often students are more comfortable with this less pragmatic approach after they know and trust one another. My original assignment for the personal writing unit was for students to explore some aspect of narrative in their culture, either writing an original narrative or retelling a traditional story.

Throughout the ten-week quarter, shorter individual sessions focus on helping students to solve particular writing problems: grammar, organization, writing blocks, etc. The students could also bring in writings from outside the course for individual work. The 1013 lab course was designed to achieve a balance between peer-critique and individual work.

Although the original course plan assumed a diverse student audience, scheduling considerations produced a remarkably homogeneous pilot group: three nineteen-year-old Vietnamese men, all majoring in computer science or electrical engineering. Thus, the group was technically oriented, and individual student problems were most commonly ESL-related. In general, they had little patience with more open writing assignments, so the pragmatic, work-oriented syllabus appealed to them.

After their meeting with a computer scientist at an engineering firm, all three were motivated to work on writing tasks. The computer scientist was able to emphasize the constant demand for writing at the workplace, while encouraging students to work creatively in writing since much on-the-job writing takes place in a collaborative setting, with final drafting subject to the critique of colleagues before it is sent to "management" for action. After the interview section students were more motivated and less inhibited in tackling assignments.

The second "job search" section was particularly successful. Two of the students had considered applying for internships in the spring, but fear of the process along with lack of familiarity with job documents had discouraged them. We worked through a range of documents, preparing dossiers and getting feedback. The unit ended with a role-playing mock interview with critique from both peers and instructor.

Placing an informal writing unit at the end of the quarter worked well with this pilot group. The students knew each other and were more comfortable discussing more personal subjects after seven weeks of group work. The informal narrative yielded a detailed retelling of a Vietnamese folk tale (by the quiet student), a sensitive discussion (by the tattooed student) of the significance of tattoos in his family and culture, and an exploration of the immigrant experience (by the student with a history assignment about immigration). All three noted that they could not have written these narratives at the

beginning of the quarter, largely because "personal" writing is not comfortable for them outside of an intimate circle of friends and family.

Assessment was based on the quality and timeliness of drafts, critiques, revisions, and participation in group work. I evaluated the planning, organization, editing, and final product. At the end of the quarter, I collected a final folder with best revisions of all written work. I gave extra points for any extra work submitted through the quarter. I also considered the progress and improvement made by each students throughout the quarter.

Overall, the experimental 1013 course, using conference groups as well as individual tutorials, succeeded. At the end of the course, the students were bringing in drafts from 3-5 pages rather than the 1-2 they had in the initial weeks. They were more confident about approaching unfamiliar tasks, knowing that they could edit an unpromising draft with the help of peer and instructor input. They began to understand the kind of writing skills successful engineers need. They developed a better sense of what various audiences expect from reports, technical manuals, letters, and narratives. They also used the analysis of documents (technical manuals, job search materials, lab reports, etc.) to good effect in constructing their own drafts. Students responded well to individual sessions which targeted their own particular weaknesses (especially /s/ /ed/ /ing/ and articles).

The homogeneity of the group caused several problems. Since all three students shared common grammatical errors based on a similar linguistic background, they had difficulty helping each other edit drafts. Too often the individual sessions with the instructor became grammar sessions. Also, the fear of giving offense made the students shy about criticizing each other's work even when they were capable of performing useful analysis. At the end of this pilot 1013 course, I recommended forming more diverse groups, containing, if possible, representatives of both genders and representatives of more than one linguistic group.

In addition, the group was too small. Any absence, illness, or failure to provide drafts or critiques hampered effective group work. If only one student failed to attend, prepare, or speak, the "group" became "dialog." Since most students referred to Composition 1013 have had difficulties with timely preparation, some deficiencies are to be expected, at least initially. Based on this pilot, I recommended a group size of four to five to insure a functional group.

Finally, the students were reluctant to take responsibility for their own group work. Instead, they turned to me each time any controversy arose. At first I found it necessary to absent myself from their group meetings to facilitate honest discussion. I would leave the students for 10-15 minutes, returning only after they had begun to confer. Only after we started unit two did they seem comfortable initiating discussion.

III

Movie Freaks and Writing Geeks: Pedagogy Goes Hollywood

Stephanie Athey

Lifting Remedial Gloom—A Theory of the Course

In developing my version of Writing Practice II for a group of four students, I thought back on my experiences in the one-on-one tutorial. The foremost drawback to the individual tutorial, in my mind, had been a sort of hovering, remedial gloom that, understandably, may affect any student who feels singled out for "extra" or "special" help that "average" students seem to do without. In spite of myself, I found that in the course of 50 minutes, this "gloom" could affect my spirits as well, and optimism could gradually thin as together we felt the tedium of exercises, felt overwhelmed by the number of problems to be solved, and viewed how long and hard the road to good writing may be.

Nor does the one-on-one structure encourage discussion or ingenuity. Two people confronting a writing dilemma naturally generate fewer ideas, solutions, techniques than

would a classroom full of students. And, again the remedial cast to the individual tutorial assures that the tutor's suggestions carry more weight, an unfortunate message that can create dependence on the instructor's problem-solving skills.

With these cautions in mind, I chose to design my course around visual texts, that is MOVIES. I did so not just because I knew movies-for-homework would enliven the group atmosphere and promote engaged discussion, but also because of my growing conviction that our electronic age requires different pedagogical materials and techniques. Students with writing trouble often have reading trouble—either on the level of comprehension or of critical reading skills. My assumption is that students are all adept at reading visual texts for sequence, innuendo, symbolism, themes; they are also practiced at reacting to and talking about films in a way that they simply aren't used to doing with print materials.

This does not mean abandoning the written text. Rather, the course tries to create a model for critical thinking, summary and analysis around this kind of familiar text, then transfers that model to an article or written text.

Course Design

The course presents three major units. Therefore, during the term, students produce a great deal of writing, but only three finished papers—two based on films, one on an article. The unit objectives break down this way:

1. Assessing and Conveying a Personal Reaction to a Film
2. Critical Reading, Summary and Analysis of a Written Text
3. Research and Analysis of a Film—research print material on a film in order to analyze the visual text

The units all take a similar approach, and propose it as a model for critical thinking on any text. In each section, the student must:

- focus on a discreet unit—one scene, one paragraph or argument;
- describe/summarize/explain that scene/argument;
- place it in context of larger film, article;
- evaluate its role or significance within that larger context.

Each course unit requires several smaller writing tasks: rush-writes, lists, summaries, outlines, rough drafts, student conferences and critical comments on group members' drafts, revision.

In dividing these tasks between group and individual sessions, I used our weekly 50-minute group sessions to discuss readings, films, conference drafts, assignments, and most importantly, to do group writing and editing exercises. During the 25-minute individual sessions the students and I would set personal goals, do writing exercises tailored to her or his needs, and offer the kind of one-on-one guidance which has always been the chief calling of the Writing Lab.

Modifications to the Original Design

I realized in the middle of our first conference on rough drafts that 1013 students were the very students who never quite got what they were supposed to do in conferences for the first level writing course. So I chose to modify conference feedback sessions into editing and revision workshops, insisting that students swap papers and write topic sentences or thesis statements for another student or rewrite entire paragraphs.

This format was extremely helpful in building critical ability, editing skills, and confidence. They began using each other's writing as models for the first time. Because these long group sessions offer enough time for four students to rewrite the same sentence or paragraph in four different ways, the workshop approach engages student creativity, creating multiple revisions, not simply the teacher's revision.

Suggestions for Further Changes

At times, the 25-minute individual sessions feel very short, especially when students come late or are having problems with the assignment. I would like to try to expand the contact time with each student. For instance, two longer individual sessions early in the quarter might provide valuable extra time in which to diagnose problems, set the goals for the quarter, and teach the student to recognize his or her particular problem situations—transitions, verbs, sentence structure...whatever they may be.

Results / Evaluation

I am enthusiastic about the conference group format for Writing Practice II. Sessions were not only more enjoyable for the student, but, I think, more effective as well. Over the term students improved greatly in critical reading, writing, and editing skills. In addition, the group format takes the sting out of individual tutorials, changes teacher authority in a positive way, and generates more student input. Furthermore, the students get the intensity of individual instruction as well as the benefit of a lively workshop atmosphere.

IV
Conclusion

The 1013 Conference Course has become a regular option during the current school year. For Fall Quarter 1990 28 students registered for Comp 1013, and 12 of them were placed into three groups of four. We have one native speaker group and two ESL —one of the ESL groups comprises students from ESL freshman comp sections while the other has students from regular sections. The instructors this year have benefited greatly from the experience of Stephanie and Pat. One has revised the schedule to allow for a little more

individualized instruction; another has decided to test the sharing aspect of the set-up by billing the course as a publications workshop with the four students as writers and editorial board members.

We will assess the course at the end of the present school year to determine whether the format needs further revision, but for now we in the University of Minnesota Writing Lab are happy with the revised Writing Practice II. The 1013 students remain individuals with specialized needs as writers and students, and the negatives cited earlier have not disappeared. But we have created a course that forces the student to take a more active role in learning to write and writing more effectively, and we have removed some of the remedial stigma of Comp 1013 without eliminating that essential tutorial component. And they leave the course more confident ------ more confident, skilled writers having benefited from the support of four other involved parties.